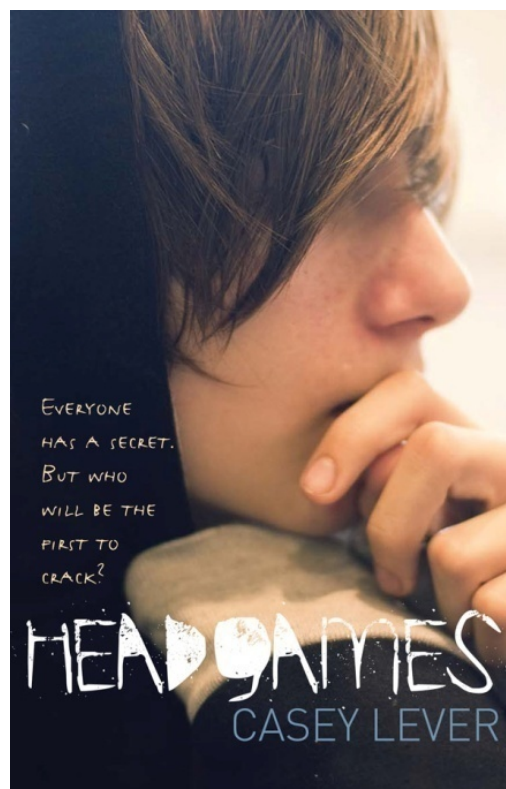


HEADGAMES

CASEY LEVER



TEACHING SUPPORT KIT

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Suggested age group: 14–17 years of age

Themes: Relationships (Friends and Family); Identity; Class; Sexuality; Grief

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SYNOPSIS

Steven Byrd is highly intelligent. He's just not very smart. For one thing, he's obsessed with Avery Adams – a girl who can't stand him. When Steven discovers Avery is involved in a secret game, he drags his best mate, Tala, along for the ride. Steven laughs when he finally hears what the game is – until he thinks about the other players. Avery has had plenty of practice at twisting the knife to hurt Steven. Connor Robson is rumoured to have been in juvenile detention, and Connor's half-sister Jude's hostility could break glass. A silly kids' game can get serious very quickly when you let other people inside your head.

Everyone has secrets. It's what you do with them that matters.

Steven Byrd is obsessed with Avery Adams, even though he knows she hates him. But when he sees a note Avery is reading, suggesting that she join a mysterious game, Steven's curiosity gets the better of him and he asks to join. He's surprised when Avery agrees.

Steven and his best friend, Tala Mataeo – a huge Samoan boy who's as sporty and popular as Steven is slight and nerdy – arrive at the house of Avery's boyfriend, not knowing what to expect. Avery's boyfriend, Connor, is a mystery himself – turning up halfway through Year 11, rumoured to have been in a detention centre, living in rough suburb Riverview, and 'hardcore' (p. 21) with his eyebrow ring and black leather jacket.

At Connor's place Steven and Tala are introduced to Jude, the fifth player of the game and Connor's half-sister. Jude has finished school and is particularly hostile to Steven.

Connor tells them that the game must be taken seriously, and that 'It can break you . . . It can take something good and destroy it' (p. 39). So when Steven and Tala finally learn that the game is truth or dare, a kids' game, they laugh.

The game begins, and the players take turns. Steven suspects that he's only been invited to the game for Avery and Jude to pick on, and his suspicion is confirmed when Jude asks Avery who she despises most in the world and she chooses Steven. Jude, too, uses a 'truth' answer to cut down Steven, describing him as 'a middle-class trendy with a rich daddy' and saying '[His] Mummy doesn't work, but she does fabulous things for charity in between having lunch with her girlfriends.' The girls' tactic backfires when Jude's words don't affect Steven – his mum has died of cancer so Jude is way off base with her accusations about his life.

After Connor's older brother shows up, the game stops. Simon's arrival brings 'a palpable atmosphere of fear' (p. 77). Steven is intrigued, since Connor has seemed to be the master manipulator until his brother's presence renders him powerless.

In the next round of the game at Avery's house, Avery spikes Tala's drinks and, since Tala comes from a non-drinking family, he gets drunk and accidentally breaks things, causing conflict. When the game continues, Jude asks Avery why she is going out with Connor, and Avery admits that it's because she's 'sick of school captain types, the boys my parents want me to go out with' (p. 90). Steven knows she's made a mistake in her 'airhead reply' (p. 90).

Later in the evening Steven follows Connor to the train station to talk to him further, and Connor explains why he plays the game:

'It's like this. People are essentially fabricators, dealers in crap. We all do it, day in, day out. We pretend we like things or people, because we want them to like us and we don't want to hurt their feelings. Everyone's the same about that, don't kid yourself you're different. The only thing that sets me apart from other people is that I like to know what kinda crap I'm dealing with. So after I started going out with Avery I wanted to know about her, so I set up the game . . . I began playing the game with some guys I know – some guys I had to spend a lot of time with. It was in the detention centre. Did you know I went to jail, Steven?' (p. 99)

'That's only because you didn't know what I know about the power of the game. About the power of truth, really. It's beautiful and it's ugly at the same time – maybe you can't understand that, unless you've seen what I've seen. I told you at the start that this wasn't really a game against other people, and I meant it. Sure, other people ask the questions, but it's you who can't live with some of the answers . . . That's why it can be a weapon. I've seen it used to hurt people, to destroy them even. But you can also use it to find out about people – their motivations, their passions.' (p. 100)

The game seems to be over when Connor and Avery break up the next week, but it feels unfinished. Steven convinces everyone to play again – Connor had said they would play 'whenever there's a need', and just because Connor's need (to get the truth from Avery about their relationship) has been satisfied, that doesn't mean the game should stop.

Everything goes wrong, though, when they meet at Tala's house. It seems that Tala has a secret, and he won't tell no matter what dare they throw at him. Finally he admits that he thinks he might be gay – then he orders Steven out of the house and refuses to speak to him. For himself, Steven's not worried in the least about his friend's revelation, but he knows that for Tala's strict and strongly religious family, Tala's secret could have a huge effect.

It takes Connor to get Tala back into the game – and now he's the one who wants revenge, on his ex-best friend Steven: 'I want you to tell us about your mother's death . . . All of it.' (p. 153) Steven's outpouring of grief takes them all by surprise, and his friendship with Tala is restored. In fact, Steven reflects that 'he was secretly blown away by what the game had brought them to. They were friends.' (p. 159)

However, when he begins to be attracted to Jude, he discovers that she doesn't see things the same way – she's happy to walk away forever. Even when Connor is badly beaten by Simon and Jude asks Steven to drive her to the hospital, she won't relent to become friends with him.

Steven's dad is horrified when he finds out that Steven's new friend Connor is dealing drugs. Steven knows that it's only because Simon forces Connor to (since Connor is a juvenile), and that Connor is too afraid to escape. Luckily, his dad's new partner Clare – who's pregnant, in another shock to Steven's comfortable life – knows Connor and can convince his dad that Connor is not like Simon.

With the game almost over, questions remain. Can Connor escape Simon's physical abuse and emotional blackmail? Will Jude ever come around to being friends – or more – with Steven?

Everyone has secrets. It's what you do with them that matters . . .

AUTHOR'S MOTIVATION

Casey Lever says: 'I don't think there are enough novels for young people that attempt to depict the reality of contemporary Australian teenage life. This particular story is the product of my fascination with the unspoken but powerful class system that exists in Australian society. Contrary to the commonly held belief that Australians are laid-back in their attitudes, I believe it takes something extraordinary for most people to break out of the social and cultural ties that bind them when it comes to forming their significant friendships and relationships. The game provides the catalyst for that extraordinary situation. '

WRITING STYLE

'It was a revelation to learn that he wasn't the only twisted, maladjusted adolescent on the planet.' (p. 114)

Closely focalised through Steven, a wealthy boy who feels isolated at home and at school, *Headgames* invites readers to see the world from his perspective as he comes to realise that he doesn't know anyone, including himself, nearly as well as he thought.

Many readers will enjoy seeing school and social life from the perspective of an intelligent ('nerdy') young man as he negotiates changing friendships, romance, and his relationship with his father. Although we only see through Steven's eyes and sometimes it would be interesting to see through alternative characters' eyes as the story progresses, to do so would not necessarily enhance the realism of Steven's voice.

Questions:

- Why did the author choose to tell the story through the eyes of Steven – a highly intelligent social outcast?
- What qualities does he possess that make him an effective narrator? (For example: naivety, vulnerability.)
- Could the story have been told by any other character? How would this change the story?

Activity:

- Rewrite a key scene through the eyes of a different character (staying loyal to their portrayal in the novel) and consider how this changes the scene.

THEMES

PERCEPTIONS AND 'TRUTH'

Consider the ways each character perceives the others. For instance, Avery is seen as a 'princess', Connor is seen as 'hardcore', and Jude hates Steven for what she perceives as his easy life and wealthy lifestyle, even though the life she pictures for him is very different from reality.

How do the perceptions and assumptions each character makes affect their relationships with the other characters? How are the perceptions and assumptions broken down? Is this the 'truth' that Connor was aiming for in setting up the game?

Many of the characters are aware of the perceptions others have of them, yet are very happy to maintain these images or personas. In what ways can these personas be:

- a) beneficial to them, and
- b) harmful to them?

How does the perception of each character differ from the truth?

Activity:

- Create a graphic organiser that shows how our perception of each character changes through the course of the novel. (See BLM 2.)

Questions:

- Are these characteristics representative of the norm?
- Do we all have secrets we would rather not share?
- Why do we hide so much of ourselves – is it social conditioning, religion, embarrassment, the need for acceptance, or any other factors?
- If placed under the spotlight, would we all confess to a secret? Does this possibility make you feel more secure about yourself?

STEREOTYPES

School students readily stereotype their peers, pigeonholing them as clearly identifiable groups. What groups exist within your school? What are the characteristics of each 'group'? What might the novel suggest about the accuracy and dangers of this practice?

GRIEF

Read pages 153–158 where Steven tells the story of his mother's death from cancer and of his grief.

Questions:

- Do you think that Steven's grief has made him who he is? Is he 'one enormous, god-awful screw-up' (p. 157) as he suggests, or is his reaction more normal than he realises?
- How has his grief affected his family?
- How might Steven be different if he (and his father) had faced up to this 'truth' many years earlier?
- Is there a 'correct' way to deal with grief?

FAMILY

Headgames looks at different types of family, from abusive siblings to emotionally distant parents to strict, patriarchal families like Tala's where 'honour' is a central belief.

Questions:

- Given that the family comes in so many forms, what does the term 'family' mean?
- Your family is perhaps one of the most powerful forces in your life – how can your family shape you into the person you become?
- Most people are at their most relaxed and natural when they are with family – this is where they can truly be themselves. In what ways is this true of these characters? In what ways is this not true? What effect does this have on the characters?

CLASS

Although living within a relatively small geographical area, the socio-economic differences between the characters are wide.

Questions:

- Compare the differing socio-economic situations of each of the characters. How does this affect their behaviour? Their attitudes? Their future expectations?
- Is there a class system at work in Australian society? If so, upon what is it based? How easy is it for people to move up or down in status?

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE

- What is domestic violence?
- Who do we expect to be the victims? The perpetrators?
- Research statistics on domestic violence. Is it confined to a specific gender, particular age or socio-economic groups, etc?
- Domestic violence has wide-reaching and long-term effects that go well beyond the physical. How might a person in this situation be affected? How would their home life situation affect all aspects of their life?
- Domestic violence is a silent problem. Few people admit to it or seek help for it. Why?
- See also BLM 1.

SYMBOLS

HANDS JOINED TOGETHER

'We're going to make a circle with our hands,' Connor explained, looking around at them all. 'The circle's the important bit. Got it?'

Everyone nodded.

Connor pressed his hands down on the cloth so that his thumbs touched. 'I swear to tell the truth or do the dare, whatever it costs.' When he finished he signalled to Avery. She stood up and, following his example, repeated the words as she made her hand print, ensuring the fingertips of her print overlapped Connor's...

Tala followed suit, then Jude.

At last it was Steven's turn. The moment he began speaking the words he felt that he'd made a mistake. All this ritual seemed wrong somehow, as if they were doing something forbidden. It was hardly threatening and not even remotely connected to the supernatural, but even so, there was something kind of creepy about the whole scene. Despite himself, he panicked. Connor was for real here and however ridiculous this game might be, he actually believed in it. Steven felt as though he'd relinquished a little of his autonomy to the group, and considering who was in that group, it was definitely unnerving. The worst part was that he'd dragged Tala into this. With effort he pushed the fear away and stole a look at his friend.

Tala was staring, mesmerised, at the hand prints. Steven took another look at what they'd created. An unbroken circle. A symbol. (pp. 44–45)

Questions:

- What does the unbroken circle represent for the players of the game? Why does

Connor feel the need to create this symbol? Does anyone break the circle? Does everyone respect the game?

- What does the symbol of a circle traditionally represent? List some examples of this symbol, e.g. wedding rings, the 'round table', etc.
- What cultures use the symbol of the linked hands and what message does it traditionally convey?
- Would the game have been as powerful if the players had not formed the unbroken circle? Given that it has no physical bonds, why is it so powerful?
- In many ways, 'the circle' provides these characters with a real family. In what ways is this true?

SOME DISCUSSION POINTS

- 'The willing, Destiny guides them; the unwilling, Destiny drags them.' (p. 3) Librarian Mrs Hartley tells Steven this quote from Roman philosopher Seneca right at the beginning of the novel. How does the concept of Destiny guiding or dragging us become relevant to the story?
- 'The game can be cruel, but it can set you free.' (p. 7) Discuss. Does the game set any or all of the characters free? How?
- Although Steven occupies a marginal social position in his school, he nonetheless is economically privileged. To what extent does Lever challenge stereotypes of gender, race, sexuality or class in this novel?
 - Compare the descriptions of each character's home, and how that changes the ways in which they all view each other. For instance, how do readers react to passages such as: 'The house was in an ex-Housing Commission estate with all the trimmings Steven had heard about but never seen first-hand – small ugly fibro homes, overgrown, plantless yards, scrappy cars, graffiti. And kids. Everywhere, on the streets, little kids in gangs. Looking for fun, excitement, trouble. Voices yelling. A baby crying. This was where Connor *lived*. It couldn't have been less like the restrained quiet he was used to, and Steven felt a wave of something close to claustrophobia.' (p. 33)
- All the major adolescent characters in this novel seem to live different lives at school and at home – for instance, Connor seems like a tough guy at school but he is abused at home, Tala is popular and cool at school but comes from a strict and religious family, Steven is popular with teachers but won't talk to his dad. Is this a realistic depiction of contemporary life for teenagers? What kinds of effects do such environments have on our perception of ourselves and of others? Are teenagers ever themselves? Why do teenagers hide behind a mask or a different persona in public?
- At first glance, Steven and Tala's friendship seems unusual, but as the novel progresses Steven and readers come to realise not only how true this friendship is, but how important. What do readers see as the 'glue' that holds this friendship together? Why is Connor so jealous of this friendship (p. 242)?
- The game played by the main characters seems both realistic and exaggerated, at once exactly and more than 'truth or dare'. How does the challenge of telling the truth change characters' understanding of themselves and of each other? Connor

says that 'People are essentially fabricators, dealers in crap. We all do it, day in, day out. We pretend we like things or people because we want them to like us and we don't want to hurt their feelings' (p. 99). Is this accurate? How or why might people 'fabricate' things about themselves? Is it realistic to suggest that if people told the absolute truth, their lives would be healthier?

ACTIVITIES

- **Comparative response:** Working with one or both of Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or John Hughes' film *The Breakfast Club*, compare and contrast these texts with *Headgames*' representation of free will versus fate, or individual versus social identities. Remember that *Hamlet* is mentioned several times in *Headgames*.
- **Personal reflection / Response:** Thinking about 'secrets' or moments in your life you would never want to share with your classmates, write a short reflection on how the experience, or the experience of the keeping a secret, has shaped the person you are.
- **Research / Informational:** Steven's new (but not wicked!) stepmother is a social worker, and is able to provide concrete help to Connor as he works to change his life. Research what services are available in your area to young people who may be experiencing crises. Do you think the novel offers a realistic depiction of such services? (See BLM 1.)
- **Creative response:** Choose one of the 'game' sessions and re-write the event from the perspective of a player other than Steven. How does the experience of seeing from a new perspective change our understanding of what is really going on? Another option may be to take Steven's experience of trying 'something new—describing it from the outside, a stranger's point of view' (p.154), and retell any event from the novel or from your own life from a 'stranger's' point of view.

RESEARCH PROJECT: Domestic violence

Read the following excerpt from pages 210–11 about the situation Connor is in:

'He's trapped,' [Steven] said. 'That's what it comes down to. If he could leave that house, get away from his brother, things would sort themselves out for him, I know they would.' He met his father's eyes. 'Maybe he could come and stay here for a while? He could share my room.'

David shook his head. 'Running away from your problems doesn't solve them, Steven. I don't know what he's doing – don't want to know, actually. But even if it is all his brother's idea, that doesn't mean he has to go along with it, does it? Why doesn't he refuse?'

Steven sighed. His father just didn't get it. If he hadn't met Simon Robson he might not get it either. 'I just feel so helpless! I wish there was something I could do.'

'There's always something you can do,' Clare said, putting a hand on his arm. 'Being there for him is important.'

Go online to research some of the options for Connor, or for any teenager in a crisis situation. How might Steven be able to support his friend? What advice would you give to someone in this situation? What factors should be considered?

As a starting point, look at <http://www.kidshelpline.com.au/teens/> and <http://au.reachout.com/> (especially their sections on what to do for a friend)

RESPONSE

PERCEPTIONS AND 'TRUTH'

Create a graphic organiser that shows how our perception of each character changes through the course of the novel.

Character	Initial reader positioning	'Truth'
Steven		
Tala		
Connor		
Avery		
Jude		